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FOREIGN OUTLOOK: SIDESTEPPING SYRIA

Syrian strongman Hafez Assad continues to have the Reagan administration bamboozled. While the White House rails at Libya's dictator Muammar Khadafy and Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as the sources of all evil in the Middle East, Reagan rhetoricians utter not a syllable of reproach against Assad.

Yet Assad is by far the most effective troublemaker in the region. He engineered the withdrawal of both Israel and the United States from Lebanon, which he now dominates. He has repeatedly bollixed up every peace initiative between Israel and Jordan, and continues to provide support to terrorists, including those who blew up the U.S. Marine barracks and the American Embassy in Beirut. He is also a staunch ally/client of the Soviet Union, which supplies him with fancy weapons that keep him in business.

Nevertheless, the administration is afraid to try pushing Assad around. The Israelis are also keeping hands off Assad, hoping he will get mired in the Lebanon quicksand. But according to top-secret intelligence reports, the Israelis believe that war with Syria's strongman is inevitable.